

# New Beginning

## A Manifesto for Reform

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### Preamble

As Catholic Christians, we acknowledge the necessity of foundational reform for our church. However, there has never been genuine and deep renewal without repentance and the life changing rediscovery of the Gospel. It is for this reason that the so called “Synodal Way” in Germany falls short of the conditions for genuine reform. In its fixation on external structure, the Synodal Way misses the heart of the crisis; it violates the peace in congregations, abandons the path of unity with the universal Church, damages the church in the substance of its faith and paves the way towards schism.

**We confess the power of the living word of God, in which there is light and truth.** This Word is witnessed in the Scriptures, passed on by the Church, and made visible by the believers as they live by their faith. This living word of God is made binding in its claims and preserved by those commissioned with the office of teaching in the church. Our conscience prevents us from ever supporting demands or follow initiatives that threaten to dissolve our bond with the living word of God or relativize it. Rather, the task before us is to seek God's will for his church today in his living word.

**We shall outline this in nine theses:**

### 1. Legitimation

**Claims and proposals in the Church are only legitimate if they are based on the gospel, embedded in the faith of all believers, and supported by the universal Catholic Church.**

The Synodal Way is not a “synod” or has any authority according to canonical

law. We reject its claim to speak for all Catholics in Germany and to make binding decisions for them. The lay people involved in the Synodal Way are representatives of associations, societies, and committees with the addition of arbitrarily consulted third parties. The proposals and claims of this movement, which is legitimized neither by vocation nor representation, testify to a fundamental distrust of the sacramental Church, constituted, as it is, by apostolic authority; their proposals will, once implemented, ultimately effect a committee-oriented, outward and permanent “lay” redistribution of power and secularization within the church. The empowerment of baptized Christians for missionary discipleship (*Evangelii gaudium* 119ff.) and thus to spiritual independence does not even come into view, when precisely this should be at the heart of any reform that deserves its name. Only a church that makes spiritual maturity and independence a central goal, is able to respond substantially and sustainably to the experience of abuse and cover-up in all its variants. We are grateful that Pope Francis has scheduled a world synod at which precisely this topic will be dealt with, and where generally binding resolutions can be made and expected.

## 2. Concept of Reform

**The church does it deed need a reformation  
of head and members, but all genuine reform in the church  
begins with conversion and spiritual renewal.  
The church has never recovered its ability to be salt and light  
to the world by way of lowering its standards  
and making structural adaptation to the world.**

While the Synodal Way takes up genuine concerns for the church, its strategy remains structurally conservative and evidently uninterested in processes of repentance and spiritual renewal. With regard to the basic social form of the church, representatives of the Synodal Way busy themselves with the preservation of the status quo: they wish to maintain and conserve the model of a highly institutionalized church that is “serving its clientele” through adaptation and modernization. What is not in view from the outset, though, is a church of genuinely shared spiritual life, in which people become a learning community of faith (and thus disciples). But the power of reform and awakening only arises where a genuinely new and good life is humanly and spiritually experienced and thus communicable. Such renewal leads by its own

inner dynamic to missionary and evangelizing power. The Synodal Way, by contrast, merely tends to the functions of a statically imagined church. Ethical discussions, for example, tend to revolve around the shift from “what was forbidden yesterday” to “what is somewhat permitted now”, so that what remains of the church can smoothly fit in with the cultural mainstream. By contrast, hardly any attention is given to the question of how people of our time can find growing, healing and integration in the light of the Gospel and in the relationship with Jesus Christ. People that can no longer be reached because one does not even try, are tried to be kept in touch with the church by withholding what is offensive to the gospel, relativizing its claims and presenting oneself as "normal" as possible. But with Dietrich Bonhoeffer we are to say: “Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church.” Cardinal Lehmann has warned of making the church a bourgeois institution by adapting to the standards of its environment: “The Church cannot act like a company that changes their supply when demand subsides. If the church does not “step out of itself into evangelization”, said Cardinal Bergoglio before his election as Pope, “it only takes care of itself and then gets sick ... The diseases, which have developed over time in church institutions, have their roots in this self-centeredness ("autoreferencialidad").”

### 3. Unity with the universal church

**We are part of the "one, holy, Apostolic and Catholic Church".**

**“That all be one” is Jesus' last wish.**

**We are suffering enough today from divisions in the body of Christ and do not want another German particular church**

The procedures of the Synodal Way were only inadequately approved by and coordinated in conjunction with the relevant institutions of the universal church and with Pope Francis. All objections made by the Pope ("Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany", critical statements at the General Audience on November 25th, 2020: “... as if it were a political party. But all the talk of majority, minority, what do you think of this and that ... I wonder: where is the Holy Spirit in all this? Where is prayer? Where is communal love? Where is the Eucharist? ") were simply ignored. Similarly, instructions of the Papal Teaching Office that relate to core questions in conjunction with the Synodal Way, were arrogantly put aside. This is what happened to doctrinal teachings about the leadership of a parish by lay persons, about the possibility

of the ordination of women, and the establishment of liturgies of blessing for same-sex relationships. We are ashamed that these objections were ignored, relativized and ridiculed, irrespective of their binding status. For us, the Catholic Church is catholic as long as it is in living unity and in dialogue with the universal Church. We do not wish to be a “church of disobedience and rebellion” and reject any attempt at establishing an ecclesiastical way of its own in Germany.

#### 4. Power

**All power in the Church proceeds from the Lord.**

**Power in the church is always just borrowed power,  
and it can only be acted out in humble service to the people.**

**Its exercise must be legitimate and transparent;  
responding to abuse of power by shepherds with bureaucratic rule  
cannot be a way forward for the church.**

The Synodal Way instrumentalized the manifest sexual assault by clerics and the inadequate institutional response to their crimes for the purpose of turning the attention to a very particular question about “power”. Instead of investigating the real causes of abuse, the theory was brought into circulation according to which the abuse was solely the result of clerical ignorance, lack of participation and lack of democracy in the church; for this reason, they argue, the power of bishops and priests must be broken and be brought under the authority of lay people (functionaries). Indeed, there *is* abuse of power in the Church and there *is* too little appreciation and genuine participation by laypeople, especially women. But we do not want a church of functionaries with a bloated apparatus and permanently installed chatter. The church suffers from a lack of spirit and from too much of institution. No one needs a church in which vocations are replaced by appointments, devotion by contract, and trust by control. We want one simple, serving and praying church in the discipleship of Christ. We want a church in which the exercise of spiritual authority is transparently and clearly oriented towards enabling spiritual independence and maturing in faith. The church is necessary for this. But in empowerment of this sort, the church also finds the critical distinguishing criterion for its own inner life.

## 5. Women

**Following the example of Jesus, the charismata of women in the church must be recognized more deeply. But it is absurd to interpret the assignment of the priestly ministry to men as a discrimination of women.**

Women should not be second class people in the Church. That is why we want to ensure that women have the same rights and duties as men at all levels in the Church, including leading positions. While the Synodal Way has stood up for this, it has done so unfortunately by willfully ignoring the binding doctrinal statement, supported by patristic councils and modern time popes alike, of *ordinatio sacerdotalis*, “which concerns the divine constitution the Church itself”, namely that “the Church has no authority whatsoever to ordain women as priests, and that all the faithful of the Church have to adhere to this decision that is binding for all times.” This binding teaching is not discriminating against women. According to the Scriptures, the people are God's bride, and Christ is the bridegroom. That the priest who symbolically represents Christ, must be a man, is only coherent. We refute the claims made by the Synodal Way according to which this order of priesthood is just a matter of preserving a reactionary male bastion and that there are some kind of equality rights for women with regard to that office. For the church, of course, it will be the acid test for genuine renewal to acknowledge and embrace the particular calling of women in the church, to gratefully accept their strengths and to rediscover the beauty of the feminine element in the church. In their own way, women are the image of God, and their potential is far from being exhausted as of now.

## 6. Marriage

**The sacrament of marriage is the covenant of a woman and a man with God and the incomparable salvific sign for God's faithfulness to his people; this sign must never be placed in a row with purely human relationships of whatever kind.**

More and more people today live in sexual relationships that fall short of the image given to us by Scripture and the Church – whether they are divorced

and remarried, whether they live together outside of marriage, in premarital relationships or relationships of a different character altogether. In the (absolutely necessary!) attempt to identify not only the shortcomings or sinfulness of these relationships but also the predicaments and needs of the people (believers, after all) who live in them, the Synodal Way falls into the trap of euphemistic appreciation. Instead of offering ways of healing and instruction for growth in the life of faith, the stress falls on adapting to the cultural mainstream. But by doing so, one does not serve the vulnerable and the injured people, but on the contrary, the healing light of the Gospel is kept from them and one obstructs their human potential to live a good and godly life. More concretely: In the “new sexual morality”, “marriage alone” is meant to be replaced by “marriage first”. Through this the sacrament of marriage degenerates into an ideal that is far removed from life and only aspired to by a questionable elite. But Christian marriage still is the genuine and legitimate place of human sexuality and the normative form in which children experience the lasting love of their biological mother and their biological father. It is the only place where human sexuality can achieve perfect integration. The obscuring talk of "maximum validity", when seen in full light, leaves human sexuality to fragmentation. It is therefore ultimately misanthropic.

## 7. Blessing of same-sex couples

**God’s blessing must not be withheld from any human being.**

**But the church has to avoid any appearance of bestowing a blessing comparable to the one due to the sacrament of marriage on other forms of sexual relationships such as same-sex.**

In his "Amoris Laetitia" Pope Francis shows great empathy for people who live in “irregular situations”. By that, he refers to situations that are "objectively" sin, but in which humans are in certain respects just overwhelmed. He says: "Therefore it is no longer possible to claim that anyone who is in a so-called 'irregular' situation lives in a state of mortal sin and loss of sanctifying grace. (...) A person can, although he or she has full understanding of a moral norm, still have great difficulty in understanding the values underlying that moral norm; or they find themselves in a concrete situation that does not allow them to act differently and make different decisions, without charging themselves again with guilt." (No. 301) The Synodal Way exaggerates this perspective of mercy and pastoral concern for the salvation of all people in that it takes the

brokenness of human nature (and with it sin) no longer into account. The tendency is to proclaim “a right to sexual intimacy for all” that obstructs the fruitful complementarity of the sexes in God's order of creation and undermines the normativity of marriage.

## 8. Lay people and priests

**The service of the Church to the world is entrusted to lay persons and priests alike and without distinction with respect to its goals and dignity.**

**Even so, laypeople should do what only laypeople can do, and priests should perform the service to which the Church calls them and to which they were empowered by ordination.**

The lack of vocations to the priesthood is a real predicament for the Church and equally a challenge for the laypersons to perform any of the tasks for which priestly vocation is not absolutely necessary. The Council speaks of “true equality of all believers with respect to the dignity and activity involved in building up the body of Christ”; but at the same time reminds us that, according to the will of Christ, “teachers, dispensers of the divine secrets and shepherds to others” should be installed. With the laying on of hands in ordination, the priest is given the apostolic authority to act “in persona Christi” as head and shepherd. He is the proclaimer of the Word of God, called by God and appointed by the Church, the dispenser of the sacraments, and – representing the Lord himself - the “Shepherd (s) and Bishop of your souls” (1 Petr 2.25). The Synodal Way obscures this specific calling of the priesthood by marginalizing it theologically and strategically. It does so by systematically trying to promote theologically qualified laypeople into substitute positions of the priesthood. We reject that kind of lobbyism and oppose both, the laization of priests and the clericalization of lay people.

## 9. Abuse

**Sexual abuse is the millstone around the neck of the church.**

**Ministers in the church are to be measured by the transparency with which they deal with past crimes**

**and install measures of prevention for the future.**

**But what we oppose is the abuse of the abuse.**

Nothing drags down the church more deeply than sexual abuse; nothing drags down the church more deeply than sexual abuse committed by clergy, monastics and community leaders, and its cover-up by those in responsible and confident positions. Some obstructed the necessary transparency and prosecution as they did not want to damage the reputation of the church, thereby in fact encouraging a further spread of inappropriate and molesting behavior. The Synodal Way – and our concern here is with it only, and not with any serious efforts towards prevention and transparency - was touted as a project of reform and renewal that would finally initiate the necessary consequences to deal with all the abuse and cover-up in the church. But what actually happened was an instrumentalization of the crisis of abuse for the implementation of a well-known politico-ecclesiastical agenda. One can justifiably speak of “abuse of abuse” here, because sexual abuse has been used in the Synodal Way to enforce unrelated goals and positions in the church. This has led to an irresponsible distortion of a debate in dire need of the greatest care and caution. To date, the fact (as evidenced by international statistics) was not taken into account that approximately 80 percent of the cases of sexual assault in the "Catholic" sphere were of same-sex type. Such denial of the factual appears to be a characteristic of the discussions within the Synodal Way. For example, it has not taken into account the fact that other types of church (including theological liberal and those without a hierarchical structure) have been affected by sexual abuse to a similar extent – though predominantly of the heterosexual type. The reaction to the abuse has turned into a proxy war, serving essentially the claims of a liberal church agenda. This has obstructed both, any adequate ecclesiastical response to the abuse and the possibility of deep reform and renewal of the Church. It shows, once again, the image of a church that revolves around itself, of a church that is more concerned about its own image than about the victims. It is precisely in this attitude, where the actual, systemic background of the cover-up lies! The Synodal Way and its proposals have not broken but rather reinforced that attitude. The logic of ecclesiastical self-preservation that is still in effect here does not lead to reform but ultimately to ecclesial atheism – to a type of acting as if there was no God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ as love and is present in the Spirit.

The only remedy is renewal from the depths of the gospel. "Go and act according to what he tells you!"